



A Study of Michigan's School Principal Shortage ¹

Philip A. Cusick
Educational Administration
Michigan State University

Introduction

Effective school leadership, in the form of a dedicated, skilled principal, is a key element in creating and maintaining high quality schools. Improving school leadership is particularly important for poorly performing schools. The passage of the federal "No Child Left Behind" legislation and Michigan's Education YES! School accreditation initiative has raised the stakes for schools and principals across Michigan. Each law calls for the removal of principals if their schools and students fail to meet new standards for adequate yearly progress (AYP).

This focus on principals comes at a time when the pool of people ready and willing to serve as principals is shrinking. Teachers represent the vast majority of principal candidates, and fewer Michigan teachers are willing to take on the job. This phenomenon is not limited to Michigan. In a recent national study, sixty percent of superintendents say their district faces a shortage of qualified principal candidates. Another study of teachers who hold principal certification shows that fewer than half are willing to consider the job.

Although the average age of building principals has risen steadily over the past 20 years, and increasing numbers

of principals are retiring, the large number of retirements does not alone explain the shortage of candidates, because the position -- particularly in secondary schools -- has increasingly opened up to women, a significant source of potential candidates who traditionally had not been considered.

To learn more about how this issue is playing out in Michigan, we talked to superintendents or human relations directors, principals and one administrative team. Other sources of data included Stephen's study (2002) of 25 small town principals in Michigan.

Are Fewer People Applying?

With the exception of respondents from upscale districts, which typically do not have problems recruiting, everyone we asked said, yes, there is a shortage of candidates. They told us that the number of candidates applying for principal positions is now about half to two-thirds the number it was 15 years ago. A suburban Detroit principal reported that his

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school needed two assistant principals and had only four applicants. An urban district personnel director recounted that “in 1989 when we had a principal opening, we had 100 or more people apply, and half were qualified. Now it’s 10 or so, maybe five are qualified.” An urban superintendent told us that “in former times, we would have an opening and we would have 40- 50 applicants, and half were qualified. Now we don’t get near that many.” Another superintendent agreed: “Ten years ago we had 65 to 70 applications; today we get 25 and the candidates are not as good.” A principal we interviewed told us, “There are two teachers in this building who would make good administrators, but they don’t want to touch it.” Everyone to whom we talked agreed that fewer people are applying, and many of those applying are unqualified.

We asked a personnel director, “What do qualified and unqualified mean?” He told us:

It takes seven or more years to be a competent teacher and these people are applying for administrative jobs when they have only three. We want to see some leadership roles in the schools, the right degrees and internships, and some experience in administration.

In response to this decline in the quantity and quality of applicants, we found that school boards and superintendents are recruiting more actively – for example, drawing recruits from the teachers serving on their School

Improvement Committees. Many districts, often in cooperation with one another and with universities, are developing internship programs where promising teachers are released to learn about administration. When a large district in suburban Detroit identified the problem as the principal being overburdened, it assigned an additional administrator to the high school to take care of curriculum. Our point is that our respondents said, “yes, there is a problem,” but each also explained how the problem is being addressed.

Is Pay the Problem?

Is school administration a less attractive job than it was in former times? We did not have to ask this question. As soon as the topic of principal candidates was raised, the respondents said, “Yes, the principal-ship is a less attractive job, and the first reason is money.” The table below helps explain why this is so.

We found that, while principals earn \$10,000 to \$25,000 more each year in annual salary, they work between 20 and 40 more days per year than teachers. Perhaps more important, their days are often 10-12 hours long, starting between 5:30 a.m. and 7:00 a.m. and going into the evening with activities and events. Principals neither shirk nor resent the demands. But many would-be administrators, particularly those raising children, look at the time required and decide not to apply. The female vice principal of a 1750 student high school, recounting her 12 hour work days, told us she told a group of would-be administrators,

| | Top Teacher | Plus duty pay | Added days for Administration | Elementary Principal | Middle School Principal | Secondary School Principal |
|-----------------|-------------|---------------|-------------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|
| Rural | \$54,000 | 57,000 | Plus 20 | 55,000 | 65,000 | 80,000 |
| Suburban/East | \$80,000 | 83,000 | Plus 45 | 85,000 | 90,000 | 107,000 |
| Suburban/West | \$70,000 | 73,000 | Plus 20 | 77,000 | 86,000 | 90,000 |
| Mid-MI Urban | \$60,000 | 63,000 | Plus 25 | 70,000 | 75,000 | 90,000 |
| Mid-MI Suburban | \$60,000 | 63,000 | Plus 20 | 78,000 | 85,000 | 90,000 |

Salary Differentials Between Teachers and Principals

“If you have a young family, I would advise you not to apply.” This is not hard to understand: a teacher, married to another professional, does need not the extra \$10,000 to \$25,000 per year if it is accompanied by extra work days, longer hours, more responsibilities and increased stress on the family.

It may be that there is no financial solution to the issue of principal shortages – it may not be practical to raise salaries enough to make the position attractive to veteran teachers already at or near the top of their pay scale. However, one solution may be to hire younger people for whom the pay differential is significant. Our research showed that thirty years ago younger people were being called on to fill Michigan’s administrative slots – in fact, the youngest Class A high school principal in Michigan at that time was 26 years old.

What Else Makes the Job Less Attractive?

Certainly money is an important factor. But the main reason given by our respondents for the decline in qualified principal candidates is that changes in the job itself have made it less attractive. Legislated expectations, increased parental demands, and the expanding number of things schools are expected to do increase the number and kind of responsibilities that fall to the principal – school improvement, annual reports, accountability, core curriculum, student safety, gender and equity issues, mission statements, goals and outcomes, staff development, curriculum alignment, the MEAP, and accreditation. Special education is a particular problem: “There used to be three pages of rules about special education,” one respondent pointed out. “Now there are 15.” Mary Stephen found among her principals that, for the small town secondary principal with limited resources, implementing and overseeing special education can be overwhelming. And while principals often have secretaries and assistants, principals are the ones held responsible: if something goes wrong they can’t say, “Someone else was

supposed to do that,” or “I didn’t know,” or “I wasn’t there.” One principal framed the issue for us this way:

What’s the problem? Fifteen hour days; night games, girls’ games, more events, travel, buses, coaches, the parents – a few of them are out of control and 5% are impossible. And there are rules for everything that there did not used to be rules about: pagers, cell phones, porn on the Internet, weapons, zero tolerance.

One repeated complaint concerns laws that govern how administrators treat minor issues, going back perhaps to the Supreme Court’s 1972 ruling in *Gross v. Lopez* that ordered schools to treat discipline with due process. What used to take the principal 15 minutes now takes days, weeks or even months.

Ten years ago when I started, [if] some kids in the hall got into an argument, had a fistfight and one says ‘I’m going to kill you,’ you’d send them home for three days and they would cool off and come back. Now legal authorities must be called; a full investigation must take place; the incident is reported to the superintendent, to the state. Reports must be written, meetings held, a recommendation for expulsion may be made and, depending on the parents’ response, the case may wind up in court.

Another elementary principal cited a case of changes in rules that put administrators in conflicting situations. A six year-old child whose mother works is left in the care of the family’s 16 year-old girl. The neighbors say the child is unsupervised and the child says his sister hits him. The principal is obligated by law to report the issue to the family

independent agency. But the principal knows that when she does that, the mother will no longer work with the school and will take the child and leave the area. Principals repeatedly told us that they are not supported by their districts in disputes with parents. “The district will sacrifice you rather than take a black eye from a parent.” One of our superintendents summed it up:

People are more critical. They expect the school to respond to them personally and if the school doesn't, they have choice and charter and their kid's foundation grant. And the state? They never help us, never ask us, never seek our advice; they just tell us. And they always assume the school is guilty of something. The tenure law, special education, the processes one has to go through over suspension and expulsion -- everything is geared to protecting the individual. The school is always on the defensive. We're always being second-guessed.

Let us repeat that the principals to whom we talked enjoy their jobs, their centrality in their communities, the interaction, activity and busyness. They do not see the regulations as wrong headed or harmful. But increased expectations and demands have made the job less appealing to teachers who see what principals do and decide not to follow in their footsteps. In one of Michigan's premier high schools, even a vice principal said, “I see what my principal does and I don't want to do it.”

Particularly troubling is the idea advocated by state and federal reforms that, in addition to everything else, principals are responsible for student achievement. Principals understand the logic behind the state's Standards for Accreditation (2002) and President Bush's No Child Left Behind

legislation and do not dispute Michigan's accreditation standards. And they endorse the Newmann et al. idea (2001) that “principal leadership is a critical factor in determining whether a school moves forward to improve learning opportunities for students” (p. 44).

But there is a lack of coherence between the responsibilities placed on principals by these and other proposed reforms and the more immediate tasks of running the school and attending to parents, who are less interested in test scores than in the way the school treats their child. “The parents come to conferences and they have two questions. ‘Does this teacher like my kid?’ and ‘Do I like this teacher?’” In one of the highest MEAP schools in the state, the principal “spends most of my time with parents attending to their questions and requests.” In an urban junior high, the principal says, “The parents want their kid to do a little better than they did. If that means staying in high school longer, that's what they want.” When it comes to the public's expectations of principals, superintendents put it plainly: “The community wants the halls clean, the kids in order, the grounds picked up, the place running smoothly.” This means the principal often has to choose between spending time on instruction or spending time with students. “When it comes to a choice between assisting a teacher and dealing with the student, the choice is always to assist the student.”

President Bush and the state authorities want no child left behind. The community wants a clean, orderly and smooth running organization. Parents – armed with choice, charter and their child's state foundation grant -- want their children to have a good experience. And for the purposes of this report, overlapping and sometimes conflicting obligations make the principal's job more burdensome and less appealing to teachers who might otherwise apply.

Conclusion

Around the state and across the country, the number of applications for the principal-ship is declining. Currently, Michigan schools are free to place non-educators in administrative positions, although parents, boards and superintendents have proven reluctant so far to turn schools over to non-school people. Instead, they are being more creative in their efforts to attract and retain promising candidates from the classroom.

The problem in part is the result of progress on another front: teachers today are better paid, better treated, and more satisfied with their positions than in former times. On the other hand, increased pressure by governments and parents put principals in higher-stress and more conflict-laden roles. Fewer teachers see the job as attractive, so fewer teachers apply. There are positive steps that many districts have taken in order to fill this important position. Those steps and others might be more broadly considered:

1. *Active Recruiting and Induction:* School Districts could work with intermediate offices and area universities to set up cooperative programs to identify potential administrators, recruit them into internships, and create up-to-date training programs.

2. *Engage In Continuous Training:* Recognizing that the principal-ship is a busy, stressful and always-changing position, districts should provide their principals with both reform-oriented training and with time for professional renewal.

3. *Establish Realistic Expectations.* Perhaps the state, in conjunction with professional administrative associations, might undertake an examination of the principal's role to see if it has, as our respondents say, become unrealistically burdened.



The Education Policy Center at Michigan State University
201 Erickson Hall , Easting Lansing, Michigan 48824-1034
www.epc.msu.edu